

# HOSPITALITY Notes By Bhakta Thomas

- It's good to start with a definition of hospitality. The etymology of the word is related to hospital: a space/place of healing, respite, wholeness. HOLY HOSPITALITY has nothing to do with Martha Steward or setting a nice table. You can show hospitality and be homeless. HOLY HOSPITALITY is making room/space for the other. Therefore, anytime we open our hearts to show compassion and love to another living entity - we are showing hospitality.
- Hospitality is one of the most important virtues in every religious tradition. There are so many examples in the Scriptures of many traditions: the Jewish Tenak (Abraham and the Three Angels), Jesus (in Luke's Gospel he is the model host and tries to show his own people to set a table big enough for everyone to find a place: Jew or Gentile, righteous or sinner), Paul instructed the Romans to "PURSUE hospitality" (Romans 12.13). In our Vaishnava tradition, there are many stories or instructions about hospitality. In the Srimad Bhagavatam, CC have both stories and strong consequences for those who don't welcome the unexpected guest, stranger, or Brahman.
- Krsna, above all, models hospitality for us with Sudhama, for example. I recently heard the story of Kanaka das who was not permitted in a Krsna Temple because of the caste system so he went around the back of the Temple and sang to Krsna and the Lord's form turned on the altar to face Kanaka das through an opening in the back of the Temple, to give him darshan, and that deity is facing the back of the Temple until today.
- Our own Srila Prabhupada's example of welcoming, giving space, cooking for the fallen souls in NYC. Room conversations where he insists no guest should leave without receiving Prasadam.
- Unfortunately, being warmly greeted and welcomed in ISKCON Temples was the exception for me when I first came to the movement. I've visited over 25 Temples in N. America. I imagined I was doing something wrong, I asked myself, "Am I committing

some egregious lack of etiquette, was there a secret password, were visitors just not welcome (maybe it's invite only club)? E.g., Mother N. Story. Every tradition can face the danger of a fortress mentality, us/them, maintenance over mission mentality (that is prioritizing the status quo). Whenever I shared my experience with Temple leadership, they appreciated the feedback and made concrete changes. So, I think my desire to be warm and welcoming is partly a response to how I was received as a first timer in many temples.

- WHAT'S MY APPROACH?
- At the beginning of the day- I ask Krsna to "please send people to Your Temple and vow I will do your best to welcome them." Where intention goes energy flows, so I anticipate he is going to send souls. God loves us to be AVAILABLE and then he rewards us with ABILITY.
- Then I'm confident that Krsna will send genuine spiritual seekers to us, and people who may not, at first, be interested, and still others who could care less about spirituality. I'm joining Krsna in what he has already begun in this soul. He's done all the heavy lifting to bring them to us AND he's going to give me all the help I may need to make this a meaningful and though-provoking encounter (he provides for what we lack. He couldn't make it any easier for us. What an exciting adventure!
- I try to have the mood that I am welcoming Krsna, situated in their hearts, to His Temple. So, this is an incredible honor. What an honor! Krsna is seated in every human heart. BG 10.20
- When a guest enters I always STAND UP and move gently not aggressively in their direction with the biggest genuine smile I can muster.- it's a physical cue to them and me: "You are important." I love the spiritual principle, "The guest is God."
- The new line I'm asking is, "Are you here for the VIP tour?" They will universally say no, just visiting, and I followup, you look like VIPs, may I show you around and give you some help? People love it, you even see their posture change.

- I usually ask where they are from and what brought them to the Temple. It gives me a sense of their frame of mind and I find out if they have been here before or if it's their first time, what inspired them to stop. That helps me customize the experience to them and start to create bridge language in my mind. And I say something like, "Wow, we are so happy you took the time to visit us." AGAIN, we are honoring them.
- THEN I ORIENT THEM (Literally means to face them to the East - to India ; ) Then, give them a quick lay of the land., "Let me tell you a little about what you can see" I tell them about bathrooms (believe me its at the top of their mind if they've been driving for hours) the animal sanctuary and show them a laminated map we have of the grounds (If I could slip away to talk about animals, it's a wonderful way to teach service, holy cow, etc). That we have a Vegetarian buffet, gift shop, and our crown jewel is our Temple upstairs. What would you like to see first?
- In the Temple tour I try to put myself back to when I first went into a Temple and how overwhelmed I was. Our small talk gives me hand and foot holds for climbing. If I know they are Mormon I'm going to emphasize some things over others. I use what's there to tell a STORY...and the story ends with them. YOU ARE Sat-cit-anandana.
- LEAVE THEM FEELING HONORED AND APPRECIATED. When I leave them, I say, "Wow, we are so happy you came today. It's been an such honor to meet you and your family (I touch my heart). Please come back." [and that is TRUE, because they are Krsna's and Krsna is seated in their heart]